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(RE)CONSTRUCTING MEMORY WITH "IMAGINATION'S INVISIBLE INK" IN CAROL SHIELDS' *THE STONE DIARIES*

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The StoEe Diaries (1993) illustrates Carol Shields's pervading interest in the writing of lives and in the way these lives are remembered and narrated. Bearing in mind Paul Ricœur's concept of "narrative identity", I propose to consider how and why Daisy Goodwill (re)constructs memories of her life and others' with the recourse to imagination. This paper will first look at the problematisation of the retrospective dimension in the novel, a problematisation that is achieved through the hybridisation of life writing genres. Memory is not a fixed feature but is constantly being re-constructed as shall be seen in the second part. Finally, I propose to consider the issue of closure in relation to the never-ending process of updating one's memory to make sense of one's life.

The StoEe Diaries illustre l'intérêt de Carol Shields pour l'écriture d'une vie et la façon dont cette vie est remémorée et narrée. En prenant en compte le concept d'identité narrative de Paul Ricœur, cet article considère comment et pourquoi Daisy Goodwill, la narratrice, (re)construit les souvenirs de sa propre vie en ayant recours à son imagination. Nous montrerons d'abord que la dimension rétrospective est problématisée par le biais de l'hybridisation des genres puis comment la mémoire apparait en perpétuelle (re)construction, avant d'étudier cet aspect du roman en relation avec la question de la finalité.

The memory at stake here is that of Daisy Goodwill Flett, homodiegetic narrator in *The StoEe Diaries* whose structure, contrary to what the title announces, evokes a fictional autobiography. In 1993 Carol Shields (1935-2003) published *The StoEe Diaries* –for which she won the Pulitzer Prize and a Governor-General Award, a novel that illustrates her pervading interest in the writing of lives and in the way these lives are remembered and narrated. The life recorded in *The StoEe Diaries* is that of Daisy Goodwill, an orphan born in 1905, married twice, mother of three, gardening columnist, widow, grandmother etc. Focusing on a year in every decade in the life of Daisy, the novel stretches over the whole twentieth century. Major historical events –such as the two world wars or Lindbergh's crossing of the Atlantic– appear as a backdrop to the various stages of a woman's life, told by Daisy herself, along with the lives of many others around her. In order to do so, the narrator supposedly draws, at least partly on her memory.

Memory is a theme that permeates *The StoEe Diaries*. Daisy, a narrator hampered by her own absence of memory of her mother who died in childbirth, makes of memory a major dimension of other people's lives. Characters consequently display the enjoyment of reminiscing, the absence and lack of

memory, the loss of memory, the rejection of memory or conversely the celebration of memory[1]. Whatever the case, memory in *The Stone Diaries* turns out to be a slippery and dubious material that can be replaced or supplemented with "imagination's invisible ink" (SHIELDS 1993: 149). Indeed, as philosopher Paul Ricœur pointed out, "[t]he constant danger of confusing remembering and imagining, resulting from memories becoming images in this way, affects the goal of faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory" (RICOEUR 2004: 7). *The Stone Diaries* self-consciously interrogates the way in which a life is recorded as Daisy Goodwill constructs memories of her life and others' with the recourse to imagination. I propose to look here at how and why this is done, bearing in mind Paul Ricœur's concept of "narrative identity", which is marked by endless reconfiguring to accommodate the changes that come across one's life or somebody else's.

This paper will first look at the question of the retrospective dimension in the novel, problematized through the mixing of genres of life writing. Memory is not a fixed feature but is constantly being re-constructed as shall be seen in the second part. Finally, I propose to consider the issue of closure in relation to the never-ending process of updating one's memory to make sense of one's life.

The question of the retrospective dimension through the hybridisation of genres of life writing

One of the aspects that marks contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction for Coral Ann Howells is "women's revisions of traditional narrative genres, which they reshape for their own purposes." This is definitely true of Shields's revision of the autobiographical genre. Indeed, as it has been pointed out, in *The Stone Diaries*, Shields took in many of the recent developments in autobiography criticism in which "[d]oubts are expressed as to the possibility of recreating the past or grasping the essence of an individual" (HANSEN-PAULY 2002: 299, ROY 2003:114). Much has been written about Shields's challenge to autobiography and about her main character's shifting and elusive identity in *The Stone Diaries*[2]. My first point here is to see how Daisy's memory is

[1] Daisy's young children are fond of reminiscing; as a child, Daisy feels the "assault of (her father's) unsorted recollections" (90); Magnus Flett does away with his memories when going back to Scotland while committing Jane Eyre to his memory; when growing old, Cuyler, Daisy and Magnus all suffer from memory loss; memorials of various kinds are erected/construed for Mercy, Clarentine and Barker.

[2] The shift back and forth between first and third-person narration and the place given to other characters' narratives have given way to a variety of readings of Daisy's narrative. Roy and Vauthier see Daisy's story as smothered by others, definitely decentered while for Osland and

conveyed through the merging of several genres of life writing that offer different perspectives on the past.

Traditionally, in an autobiography, the narrator stands at a given point in his life from which he looks back on his past and selects and orders what he remembers into a narrative that highlights the development of his personality. Yet, deliberately contradictory signals are sent in *The Stone Diaries* (58), the most discussed being the unsettling to-and-fros from first to third person narration. Indeed, contrary to a regular autobiography in which the autodiegetic narrator is the authority on his/her life that constitutes the focus of the narrative, Shields's novel presents a disturbingly fluctuating use of subjects and pronouns. The narrator thus distances herself from her younger self to the point of referring to herself in the third person in the second chapter. In a formal departure from the genre of autobiography, the authority on Daisy's life very often no longer seems to be herself but a third-person narrator when, for instance, chapter 7 begins like a biography: "1965 was the year Mrs Flett fell into a profound depression" (229). The text thus oscillates between biography and autobiography indefinitely, suggesting in fact a third type, as it is neither one nor the other but merges characteristics of both. The term "auto/biography" used by Liz Stanley, "a term which refuses any easy distinction between biography and autobiography, instead recognizing their symbiosis" (STANLEY 1992: 127) seems apt here. The fictionalisation of the self is put forward, and the distinction between fiction and supposedly factual genres like biographies and autobiographies is challenged.

Daisy sometimes seems to disappear and be replaced by other voices and lives. Occasionally, she apparently vanishes behind other characters' narratives, newspaper clippings, letters and other elements. In this respect, another genre comes to mind here: that of "memoirs" which has a wider scope than auto/biographies as it aims at giving an account of others.

Both auto/biographies and memoirs however look back on the past using memories, which is not the case of yet another genre of life writing summoned in Shields's novel. Another striking element is indeed the discrepancy between the form and the title of the novel with the word "diaries"[3]: contrary to an

Johnson, Daisy is at the origin of the whole story: omniscience is what she adopts for imaginative record of past events. Johnson convincingly reads Daisy's warning about the distortion of every narrative as "an embrace of playful authority" (JOHNSON 2003: 215) where she positions herself as the selector of facts. In *The Stone Diaries*, Shields applies the idea derived from Philippe Lejeune that "language forces the subject to objectify himself as though he were a third person" (MARTENS 1985: 29).

[3] Even though I am aware that "the Stone Diaries" was not Shields' original title but the result of a "compromise between American and UK publishers" (RAMON 2008: 131).

auto/biography and to memoirs, a diary is a day-to-day enterprise, with hardly any retrospective dimension, free of all organisation, the writing following the happening of events. Both perspectives, one apparently looking back on a rather distant past, the other seemingly commenting on the near present, jointly appear in *The Stone Diaries*. While some chapters start firmly rooted in the past with, for instance, "My mother's name was Mercy Stone Goodwill" (1), others begin in the present, suggesting near concomitance between the event and its narration. Such is the case at the beginning of chapter 7: "Victoria Louise Flett is only twenty-two years old […] It is 1977" (265), which reads if the narrative were devoid of a retrospective perspective.

In yet other cases, there is a shift in tenses from the past to the present. This use of fluctuating tenses – indicating that the temporal point of view from which events are seen varies – suggests that the retrospective dimension is questioned, rather than absent in *The Stone Diaries*[4]. For instance, the scene that Daisy depicts with her friends is first anchored in the past before slipping to the present tense.

> She means a bee-day," Elfreda Hoyt *told* Daisy. […]
> She and Daisy and Labina Anthony *have assembled* in a curtained-off back room of Marshall's Ladieswear a few days before the wedding for their final fittings. […]
> It *is* a hot afternoon, but a little electric fan *blows up* the young women's billowing skirts, helping to keep them cool" (105, italics mine).

The use of the present tense conveys immediacy to the past events that appear unmediated by memory. Sequences from the past told in the present are like a series of snapshots or still lives (58) assembling to form a narrative. But the framing of these depictions in the present draws attention to the artificial device. This problem of the access to the past is given pride of place, appearing in the incipit. The first sentence in the past tense: "My mother's name was Mercy Stone Goodwill" (1), sets the character at a distance, in a finished past. By the end of the very first paragraph, however there has been a shift to the present tense, via the present perfect: "Of course she's divided the recipe in half, there being just the two of them, and what with the scarcity of currents, and Cuyler (my father) being a dainty eater. A pick-and-nibble fellow, she calls him […]" (1). It appears that with a free indirect style narration, the reader is now given access to the character's thoughts. The past is literally made present and memory as an instrument or medium of recording past events, thoughts and impressions is made transparent.

[4] Whereas for Howells, *The Stone Diaries* is "not (written) as a retrospective project" (HOWELLS 2003: 83).

In this particular case, memory is all the more transparent as it is non-existent! A few pages later, the narrator candidly puts in a comment that suggests that there is no evidence on which to base this recording of her mother just before the birth: "A witness, had there been a witness present in the little back kitchen, might have feared a fainting spell, even though my mother is not much given to faintness" (4). It turns out that the narrator is not building up on anybody's recollections: memory is not available, and must be replaced and constructed by "imagination's invisible ink"(149).

This candid admission is later followed by metafictional comments. Autobiography rests on a series of choices:

> Memory is selective […] Also constructing a life is selective – piecing together various kinds and forms of a self's past – is itself highly selective: selecting in what fits a framework, selecting out what appears not centrally relevant (Stanley 1992: 128).

This selection is foregrounded at the macro level of *The Stone Diaries* which focuses on a specific year as emblematic of a stage in Daisy's life, for instance, "Love, 1936" and "Motherhood, 1947", which necessarily entails that her auto/biography is "an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgeable gaps" (76) as directly stated by the narrator. This issue of selection is addressed in a most forward manner by the narrator who makes a few meta-fictional comments on the distortion of every narrative, including that of one's own life, such as: "The recounting of a life is a cheat, of course; I admit the truth of this; even our own stories are obscenely distorted" (28). There are a number of playful warnings as to the veracity of the facts told. For instance, "as a captive of her own *drama*, she is likely to touch up her image a little" (145, italics mine). The word "drama" conveys a reference to the world of fiction and imagination. The reliability of the narrative is gradually openly questioned until "Maybe now is the time to tell you that Daisy Goodwill has a little trouble with getting things straight; with the truth, that is." (148). This, of course, is not limited to contemporary events: "Furthermore, she imposes the voice of the future on the events of the past, causing all manner of wavy distortion" (148). Memory is openly said to be distorted and to be submitted to a new course.

The ultimate aporia and challenge to the notion of historical record is the issue of the written word, since Daisy's auto/biography is unwritten[5]: "written

[5] Shields spelt out the unwritten dimension of the life construct (SHIELDS 1993-94: 58). With this unwritten account of a life, Shields illustrates what she had her main character think in *Happenstance, The Husband's Story*: "For a historian he had always had a peculiar lack of faith in the written word, and furthermore, he had never been fully persuaded that history was, by definition, what it claimed to be, a written record. More often, it seemed to him, history was exactly

on air, written with imagination's invisible ink" (149) which enhances the fluctuating dimension of her account of the past.

(Re)construction of memory with the help of imagination as necessity.

Throughout the novel – when evoking her parents, be it their lovemaking or their respective deaths –, the narrator is obviously inventing facts, not recovering them. Indeed, in Lisa Johnson's words, "the power of the imagination to transform 'the available materials' merges as a central theme in this novel" (JOHNSON 2003: 202). When a child, Daisy understands the necessity to narrate her life to avoid erasure and absence. When confined to her room with measles, she realises that life continues without her and that the only way to exist and to maintain a grip on life is to give it a shape with the use of her imagination:

She understood that if she was going to hold on to her life at all, she would have to rescue it by a primary act of imagination, supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections, conjuring the pastoral or heroic or whatever, even dreaming a limestone tower into existence, getting the details wrong occasionally, exaggerating or lying outright, inventing letters or conversations of impossible gentility, or casting conjecture in a pretty light (76-77).

The reader is startled by the "mise en abyme" which confirms Daisy in the role of the narrator: here are evoked events that have already been narrated (such as the description of the Goodwill tower and the letters) or will be later. Therefore, when the narrator declares that what will be remembered of Daisy's first encounter with her father is that "her fingers will always remember the feel of those tumblers" (77-78), this later assertion is necessarily dubious for the reader. The modal "will" is ambivalent here, indicating indeed a mere prediction or the narrator's decision regarding what is to be remembered. The reader has to accept that "narration", which implies "supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections, becomes the reality, becomes the memory.

Daisy's "narration" of her life in the manner just quoted also applies to her past (and necessarily extends to other characters). If we consider, for instance, the tale generated by the absence of memory of her mother in chapter 1, Daisy is right to feel she has given birth to her mother rather than the other way round (191). Memory is indeed replaced by what Osland calls "Daisy's

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the reverse – what wasn't written down. A written text only hints, suggests, outlines, speculates." (107).

imaginative recuperation of the past" (OSLAND 2003: 97). Daisy writes up the past to suit the present. Osland thus reads the story of Mercy's wedding ring buried at the foot of the pyramid as an instance of this, a story made up by Daisy as "an explanation for why she does not possess anything of her mother's" (OSLAND 2003: 97). Another example of memory being shown to be constructed is the "revisioning" done by Daisy when her father-in-law turns out to be different from what she imagined: "a conscious revisioning will be required of her: accommodation, adjustment" (307). She thus announces she will commit a new image to her memory[6], in what seems to be a perfect illustration of Ricœur's narrative identity, marked by fluctuation: "As the literary analysis of autobiographies confirms, the story of a life continues to be reconfigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This reconfiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told" (RICOEUR 1998: 246).

As if echoing Ricœur's thoughts, Carol Shields declared, "I'm interested in how we describe our own lives, how we think them into existence. The construct of your life that you carry around in your head changes every day" (1998, quoted in HOWELLS 2003: 95). Daisy's narrative identity, this constant redefinition and reconfiguring[7] depending on relations with others and following various changes in one's life, is put forward in the changing names Daisy is referred to by herself and or different people depending on the social or temporal context: Daisy Goodwill, Daze (for her friend Fraidy), Mrs Flett, Mrs Green Thumb, Deed (for possible lover/editor), Mother, Aunt Daisy, Grandma Flett. This concept of narrative identity is useful here because memory and identity are interlocked. Memory may contribute to forming one's identity, but conversely identity definitely contributes to forming one's memory. Because identity is unstable, memory is re-constructed to go along with changes. Keeping up with the necessarily unstable narrative identity, one memory displaces another: memory is constantly re-constructed, which is why Magnus Flett's life, for instance, is re-presented slightly differently in various chapters.

In the end, only stories remain. Daisy recounts how her father started building a stone tower as a memorial to his wife and to his love for her. But memory comes to an end: while Cuyler himself is said to have "forgotten the

[6] Note that the revisioning has already happened: we have read a (revisioned) narrative that makes it possible for Magnus to have become interested in *Jane Eyre*. See 94-100; 138-140.

[7] In Howells's words, Shields "adopts a postmodern performative concept of identity as shifting, relational, and subject to endless reconfigurings, in hybridized fictional forms" (HOWELLS 2003: 6).

impulse that launched the tower" (73)[8], the origin of the tower becomes the object of fiction. Memory is replaced by imagination as it is embellished and made to conform to other tales of romance: "a beautiful young wife dead of childbirth. A handsome young husband, stunned by grief […]" (70-71). The addition of pleasing qualities signals that this story is turned into a conventional one but also an atemporal one.

The issue of closure

One of *The Stone Diaries*' claims to postmodernism is a continuing undecidibility that can be witnessed in the tension between closure and the process of reconstruction of one's memory.

The reconstruction of memory is presented in *The Stone Diaries* as a never-ending process in a narrative that is marked by instability in order to keep track of Daisy's narrative identity[9]. If the aim of the constant updating of one's and others' narrative identity is to make sense of the situation, to install coherence in one's life, it never reaches a sense of closure as defined by Barbara Herrnstein Smith when studying endings as "the sense of stable conclusiveness, finality or 'clinch'" (HERRNSTEIN SMITH 1968: 2), that which "allows the reader to be satisfied by the failure of continuation or, put another way, [...] creates in the reader the expectation of nothing" (HERRNSTEIN SMITH 1968: 33), albeit temporarily.

This, along with her hybridisation of life writing genres in *The Stone Diaries* that attests of her endeavour to subvert the old model to represent Daisy's life better, is evidence of Shields's departure from tradition. Shields made it clear that, for her:

> The old idea of the novel, the conclusion, the tying up and everything does not work very well with women's lives. It's what some feminists call the ejaculatory way of telling a story. Women's lives are more of an up and down, up and down, around, in a circle." (SHIELDS 2000)[10]

[8] About his wife Mercy, "he cannot recollect the look of her face or the outline of her body" (73). When dying, Osland notes Cuyler is struggling to remember what it was he had buried at the base of his pyramid (97).

[9] For Vauthier, "the dialectics of order and disorder never finds its closure" (VAUTHIER 1987: 187): she alludes to article by Deborah Schnitzler who sees the photographs as "illustrat(ing) in the visual medium the open-endedness and indefiniteness of Daisy's account" (VAUTHIER 1987: 189, note 15).

[10] Other comments on endings by Shields include: "women's writing has already begun to dismantle the rigidities of genre […] and to replace that oppressive narrative arc we've lived with so long, the line of rising action – tumescence, detumescence – what some feminists call the ejaculatory mode of storytelling." (SHIELDS 2003: 35) and "I like endings that veer off in strange directions, rising

In his recent study on novel endings, Ingersoll calls the "masculine paradigm" these traditional narratives that are characterised by a final explanation, that offer a "climax variety of ending" (INGERSOLL 2007: 29). Shields's novel falls into Ingersoll's category of texts that do not even try to write back to the older model but merely ignore it, "working in a space where the older model no longer has a presence" (INGERSOLL 2007: 18), favouring fragmentation and inconclusiveness. While the point of narrative identity is to smooth out the roughness of sharp changes, Shields counteracts this by stressing the fragmentation of a life. What remains in the representation of Daisy's life, as of her father's and Magnus Flett's, is the discontinuity between every stage of each life, the characters going – as is said of Cuyler Goodwill– "from one incarnation to the next" (91).

As Wendy Roy points out, "Shields' novel undermines autobiography's traditional privileging of linear and cohesive narratives" (ROY 2003: 114). Indeed, whereas the author of an autobiography usually reorganises his/her memory to highlight a progression or development, the narrative of *The Stone Diaries* offers no linearity. It alludes instead to voids and gaps (76)[11] and foregrounds them in its obvious selection of events in Daisy's life, and keeps jumping backwards in time irrespective of the dates announced in the chapter headings. For instance, Daisy's father's death which happens in 1955 and is briefly mentioned in the chapter called "Work, 1955", is detailed in a chapter supposedly devoted to another year as indicated by the title: "Ease, 1977". Cohesion is also deliberately challenged with the hybridisation of life writing genres coupled with photographs and factual looking documents such as newspaper clippings or recipes. Moreover, instead of the usual one-sided view on one's life, there are apparently varying and sometimes conflicting sources of information in *The Stone Diaries*. The chapter entitled "Sorrow" illustrates how the same subject gives way to different interpretations and consequently to different memories, depending on how s/he is involved in other individuals' narrative identities. This chapter which focuses on Daisy's depression does not explain the illness in a straightforward way but offers a variety of possibly valid explanations, all in keeping with the character who supposedly voices them, drawing on their own memory of Daisy and themselves. Like a historian who must construct a plausible narrative out of the memories (in testimonies) of participants in the events, the reader is left with these different testimonies that form a multifaceted portrait of Daisy's life. However, even though they all

rather than falling, or endings that make sudden leaps into the future of the past, bringing about a different quality of oxygen altogether" (qtd in JOHNSON 2003: 222).

[11] See ROY 2003, 118. Gaps in Daisy's life are listed by MELLOR 1995.

originate from Daisy herself, it proves impossible to form a whole out of all the aspects presented and to reach closure. The reader must accept instability and unfixity as the rule.

Yet, early on, Daisy herself voices a definite desire to offer coherence: "I long to bring symmetry to the various discordant elements" (23), she announces in the first chapter and to some extent, she does coerce events into a meaningful narrative, "[…] summoning up the necessary connections" (76) which implies a bending or arranging of the facts. However, the closing echoes that could mean closure ring tellingly false. The death of Pinky Fulham, the journalist who took Daisy's job as a garden columnist from her, thus sounds like wishful thinking, like the punishing of the villain at the end of a tale. Although it is wrapped up in facts – "Actually eleven North Americans per year are killed by overturned vending machines. It was in the newspaper." (330) –, doubt is allowed with "'Someone told me', Grandma Flett said mysteriously. 'Or maybe it was in the newspaper'." (330). While Daisy significantly returns to this episode, threads that matter less to her are left hanging, indicating that whatever tying up there is at the end, it is all Daisy's construct[12].

The title of the last chapter – "Death" – announces the end of Daisy's life and of the novel. Yet the finality of the event is contradicted by the absence of date—an absence all the more remarkable as all the other chapter headings are anchored in time. This is because in fact Daisy is not dead yet. But the last chapter takes a particularly incohesive form: the alternating of thoughts, untagged dialogues between her children after her death, with recipes and lists which illustrate different aspects of Daisy's past does suggest increased fragmentation, as Daisy now close to dying, loses the ability to arrange her narrative.

A number of the fragments in the last chapter are imaginary dialogues between Daisy's family members after her (imagined) death. The inclusion of mock factual documents such as a recipe, a to-do list or a menu suggests the possibly misleading textuality of memory. Daisy's children are shown to be revising their memory of their mother with what they discover. The re-construction of Daisy's past is now her children's concern. After her (imagined) death, Daisy's children find the photograph of her first marriage, an episode she never mentioned to them (350-51). The dialogue expresses their puzzlement at what they ignored and is very quickly followed by the interpretations they make of it, the conclusions they draw which imply

[12] The disappearance of Maria, Daisy's father second wife, remains a loose end. In keeping with her own character, Fraidy is said to think she saw her with another man, while Daisy wants to believe her in Italy.

readjusting their memories. This episode suggests how wrong we may be when looking at the past, when (re)constructing memories. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, "[f]acts do not speak for themselves […]: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole" (HUTCHEON 2002: 56). Interestingly too, this scene reaches back to the beginning of the novel, to the first chapter when Daisy comments on her parents' wedding photograph, drawing from it her own imaginary conclusions. No sense of closure is however to be derived from this circularity: since texts and images with which memories are constructed and reconstructed will be re-interpreted again and again, they also have an untotalizing value, a quality of inconclusiveness.

Daisy's last avowed and unspoken words – "I am not at peace" (361) – clearly deny closure. While being at peace suggests calmness, quietness and stillness, Daisy's negation again suggests instability. This is reinforced in the "scenic ending" (TORGOVNICK 1981: 11), which focuses not on fulfilment and completion but on lack of:

> "Someone should have thought of daisies."
> "Yes."
> "Ah, well" (361).

Shields's 1993 novel could be termed an "Unidentified Reading Object": a text that repeatedly baffles the reader because it refers to various genres of life writing without belonging to any. In so doing, it points to the instability of memory that is always being reconstructed to suit our narrative identity. This constant renewal finds an echo in the inconclusiveness that marks the narrative in *The Stone Diaries* and its ending. Because Daisy Goodwill disappears so often behind other characters, the reader may sometimes be in doubt that she is the heroine of her own life – to paraphrase the incipit of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* – yet she certainly is so if we consider the process of "narrating" of putting her own experience into narration.

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